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Compelling

 Thirty-five years ago last month, just after I had been indicted for releasing several thousand pages of Top Secret documents that had come to be known as the Pentagon Papers, Senator Wayne Morse informed me that I had missed a chance to avert the Vietnam War altogether. Our invasion and air assault on Vietnam (to this day, that realistic description of our escalated “involvement” in the thirty-year war is totally unfamiliar to Americans) was then six and a half years old. We had dropped X (6?) million tons of bombs on Vietnam—three times the total of two million tons we had dropped in World War II. Y Americans (50?) thousand Americans had been killed and Z wounded; over two million Vietnamese had died, and M become refugees. The war had four more years, another million tons of bombs, to go; N thousand more Americans killed, another million more Vietnamese.

Morse had been one of two in the Senate (with none in the House) to have voted against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on August 7, 1964, which LBJ treated as a Congressional Declaration of War, though Senator Fulbright had assured the Senate—based on private, false assurances he had received from the White House—that the President had no such intention. Documents which had just been published in the New York Times—provoking a federal injunction against further publication, the first in our history—revealed that ...provocation, threats, plans for escalated bombing since the spring of 1964, and doubts that any attack on our ships had occurred that night.

Morse had heard me say that, as a special assistant to the ASD starting on August 4, I had had these particular documents in my safe at the Pentagon that week, seven years earlier. He now told me, after shaking hands and congratulating me for releasing them to the New York Times: “If you had given those documents to me at the time” —when he was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Senator Fulbright—“the Tonkin Gulf Resolution would never have gotten out of Committee. And if it had somehow been brought up on the floor of the Senate for a vote, it would never have passed.”

He was telling me that it had been in my power, in my first week as a full-time employee in the Pentagon (after five years as a consultant), to have averted all these deaths. It was not something I was eager to hear. My first reaction to that thought was that it was overstated. I told myself that LBJ would have found another occasion to get such a resolution passed—as his National Security Assistant McGeorge Bundy said later, provocations like that alleged on August 4 “were like streetcars”: if you missed one, another one would come shortly. And if necessary, I felt sure, he would have gone ahead with massive escalation, if the alternative were an imminent Communist victory in Vietnam, even without a resolution. It was many years later, reflecting on what Morse had said once again, that I realized that if I had actually given Morse and the Committee a large part of the contents of my safe by September or October, he was very probably right. The long-planned escalation that his Joint Chiefs and his top advisors had pressed for all year in 1964 could not have been launched, in the face of the almost-certain resistance of the Democrats in Congress, who after November comprised two-thirds of the Senate. Those documents, then available not

only to me but to scores of officials and staff aides in the Pentagon and State Department, would have revealed that the President's crucial campaign assurances that fall that "we seek no wider war" were massively deceptive. More than a few maverick Democrats in the House would have introduced resolutions of impeachment, with very good basis. These would not have passed, or come close, in a Congress dominated by the President's own party (with most of the opposition party favoring the war). LBJ would have been elected anyway, since his opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater—a reserve Air Force Major General—advocated an even more aggressive war policy, possibly including the use of nuclear weapons. But he would not have won by the unprecedented landslide he received—with many Republican crossover votes—in what amounted to a national referendum against escalation, with the electorate ignorant that they were facing no real choice on Vietnam by the two candidates. (Goldwater knew this, from his weeks on active duty in the Pentagon that spring, but chose not to inform the public. When asked why, after the Pentagon Papers came out, he said, "Who would have believed me?") Nor, more importantly, could LBJ have shoveled the country aboard a streetcar named Pleiku, bound for massive war, as he did, with my low-level help, the following February.

--Someone did inform Morse, to ask about the whereabouts of the destroyers and their actual mission. Morse asked McNamara in closed session, but McNamara simply lied to him. I knew that, by reading the classified testimony the next day, but Morse didn't have the documents I had to confront the Secretary with, and his questioning was dismissed. He did correctly infer, and charged on the floor of the Senate, that our destroyers had

been sent to provoke an occasion to commence war against Vietnam. But neither he nor anyone else in the Senate at that time guessed that there was any reason to doubt that the attacks on our destroyers had taken place. It was three and a half years before the Senators read a cable from the commodore of the destroyers that I had read within minutes of its being sent on August 4, warning that nearly all of his previous reports of torpedoes fired at him had been mistaken and recommending no action be taken until daylight reconnaissance had taken place. ...

--July 1965: lies about what Westmoreland had requested, and what LBJ was sending. Consideration of resigning by General Johnson: later shame that he hadn't. Again, consideration by the JCS in August 1967: they back off (a coup ; and no effect).

--I didn't think of revealing anything. If I had, I almost surely would not have done it (and I would have even more acute regrets in retrospect). Why not?

--But there were others with much more confidence in their judgment than I had then, and potentially much more influence with the public and Congress. Ball, Hughes, Humphrey, Thomson, JTM, W. Bundy, Bob Johnson (?), Clifford; vs. esc in July, McG B, Russell, Fulbright, Mansfield,.... Super-secret, didn't know each other's position (see Ball-Humphrey, JTM). (See no-secretary rule with my memo for JTM). (Secret JTM file: I transferred for looking at it). Silence of the Doves. Could July escalation have been averted? Less sure, too late; a national debate might well have favored the JCS position.)

What McNamara could have done, in December, 1965 (though working from within looked more promising, wrongly, in absence of real negotiating position). McNamara 1966: at Fulbright hearings! Introduce willingness to negot with NLF, give them share in power—as he said to Harriman. Probably didn't tell LBJ.

In 1967: McNamara and me. I propose backing Huong in election, withdrawing support from Thieu. McNamara: working on holding down bombing; he HAD just helped reject the 206,000 request, thank God. But he loses on bombing, in August. Now he goes all the way, to LBJ: (Halperin): and gets fired. (What guidance did he give MHM on memo?) RFK urges him to get out and resist war; the TWO of them could have pushed real negotiations (instead of the Tet offensive); an RFK candidacy, instead of McCarthy. (History as revealing the possibility of choice, to individuals in the future.

Speculation, but essential, if any real lessons are to be drawn, if history is to be anything but an entertaining story (possibly, partly true), a story of inevitability and fatalism, passivity). (Isn't all science based on "counter-factual" inference: if this had been different, if this had happened instead... all inference as to causality...; and it's not all based on experiments that vary parameters and variables; what about astronomy, cosmology, weather, ocean currents...)

McN did have a choice: join RFK (who had raised these proposals in 1966 and again in 1967). GIVE HIS OWN MEMOS, AND THE EVIDENTIARY BASIS FOR THEM, TO FULBRIGHT, AND TESTIFY ON THEM (rather than just testify to Stennis on bombing). OR JUST: TELL THE TRUTH, AFTER BEING FIRED, TO THE TONKIN

GULF HEARINGS IN FEBRUARY, RATHER THAN LIE. AND GIVE HIS ACTUAL ADVICE, THEN. WORK TO CHANGE NEGOTIATING PROPOSALS AFTER MARCH, RATHER THAN SILENCE.

OR, IF MCNAMARA WOULDN'T DO THIS, HALPERIN COULD HAVE.

(HA—I'VE NEVER DISCUSSED THIS WITH MHH). (He just told me, he would have leaked the Wheeler report in a minute, if he thought it would have stopped the proposal; but he thought it would lead to support for Westmoreland. Why didn't he leak more, after he saw that the reaction was the opposite?) (Yes, MHH could have done what I did, but with much greater access and effect...still better, Morris et al in 1969-70. Instead, they worked for candidates—did they tell them?—just like Rand Beers in 2003-04: like him, losing. What did Beers tell Kerry?)

(compelling)

What Clarke, Scheuer, Wilkerson, Pillar, Beers and many generals COULD STILL MAKE CLEAR TO US PUBLIC—AS WAS NOT DONE IN THE 2004 CAMPAIGN, OR SINCE—IS THE INSIDE EVIDENCE AND OPINION THAT THE WAR STRENGTHENS AL QAEDA AND THREATENS AMERICAN LIVES AT HOME. IT IS part of the war on terror, as the House has just voted: THEIR part, a crucial support of the Al Qaeda strategy. AQ got NO help from Iraq under Saddam (forget Zarqawi's hospital care!); now it's a base for them, a recruiting station, a target for killing Americans, and their MAIN recruiting pitch worldwide (with our support for Israel, second: another part of the war on terror, again, their part). AQ doesn't want us to set a

date for leaving Iraq; they don't want us to leave Iraq, ever (in contrast to the Sunni insurgents, and even many Shia). See House resolution.

And an attack on Iran will strengthen AQ even more (and may launch a terror campaign by Shia—Iranian and Iraqi—in the US, joining the Sunni AQ).

When Morse first told me that, I focused only on what he said about the Resolution, and I told myself that it wouldn't have made that much difference if LBJ had failed to get that in August of 1964. He would have found another chance to get it; or failing that, he would have gone ahead without it, about when he did, a few months after the election. It was only many years later that I reexamined that question, and realized that my opportunities to inform the Congress and public weren't limited to that first week in August. The safe-drawers in my tiny office next to the Assistant Secretary's were filling up, day by day, with Top Secret cables and memos that contradicted every impression and assurance that the Administration was giving the public throughout the election campaign. The hopelessness of the revolving-door coup governments in Saigon, the petty jockeying for power and spoils, their utter lack of legitimacy in the eyes of Vietnamese, near-anarchy in Saigon: the dominant question in the offices of the Pentagon, "Can these regimes even appear to hang together till...after our election, when the president will allow us to bomb the North and put in troops?" The daily elaboration of plans to escalate, first formulated at the beginning of the year. The president's reluctance to execute them before the election, though none inside doubted that he would find it necessary to do so almost immediately after it. New "provocations" that evoked

consensual recommendations from his civilian and military advisors for a “response” against the North: on September 18, when destroyers again reported being attacked in the Tonkin Gulf, a replay of August 4, again a false alarm; then, a real attack by the VC on our air base at Bien Hoa, on November 2, just before the election. High-level consideration of provoking or manufacturing an incident that would justify our full-scale “retaliation,” concluding that this should be postponed for the moment. In short, eagerness and readiness at the highest levels of the president’s military and civilian advisors to implement what amounted to Senator Goldwater’s recommendations as soon as possible, with every expectation that the president would implement these as soon as the voters had rewarded his false assurances that he “sought no wider war.” No hint ever leaked to the public that Goldwater’s call for escalation—described by incumbents as not just unnecessary and unwise but reckless and “crazy”—was shared by any senior member of the administration or military advisor: such as, in reality, all the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretaries of Defense and State and the National Security Adviser. On election day, November 3, 1964, instead of voting, an interagency group including me met at the State Department to begin formulating and evaluating different forms of widening the war, while voters were casting their ballots in an unprecedented landslide against the choice of any of the escalations we were considering. We hadn’t met the day before lest what we were deliberating might leak to the electorate and reduce that landslide. We didn’t meet the next day, because, to get started on some form of the Goldwater/JCS strategy, there was no time to lose.

No one leaked. The secret was thoroughly well kept, despite the fact that at the second level of policy-making—my boss, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for

International Security Affairs John T. McNaughton, and his counterpart in State, Assistant Secretary for Far East William P. Bundy—and below, there were significant doubters about the direction of policy. My boss, in particular, wanted us out of Vietnam--“Out, out, out!” he said once, slapping his desk—and both of us were totally opposed to the strategy of bombing the North. But we worked for McNamara, we prepared arguments for him to convince the president and others, and John supported his position so energetically in interagency meetings that he was known as a hawk. And we kept our opinions to each other. (I was told not to share his disagreements with McNamara even with his other deputies.)

In February, 1965, I even carried out McNamara’s request, through McNaughton, to spend a night urgently collecting from military headquarters in Saigon a list of recent atrocities by the VC with which to convince the president to initiate the long-planned campaign of bombing the North. Johnson had several times accepted in principle the necessity of doing this, in face of a consensus of his advisors and despite his own skepticism about the wisdom and efficacy of doing this—I thought he was right about this, and he sounded better on this point than McNamara, whose motives for pushing it were puzzling to me—but he was delaying his decision to set it in motion. I thought the policy would be a disaster, killing large numbers of people in North Vietnam to no effect. But when McNaughton passed on McNamara’s order, it didn’t even occur to me to embarrass John with his boss by refusing it, or even questioning it. I rushed down to the Joint Staff and spent all night, with an open line to Saigon, compiling a list of VC “terrorist” acts to justify our “retaliation,” which a secretary typed up for me in the early

morning and John took over to McNamara on the run in time for his breakfast meeting with the president. It was the worst thing I've ever done.

Later that morning, before I went home to bed, I had the rare experience of having McNamara thank me personally for my help. On his return from the White House, he told John to tell me, "It was just what I needed." Nevertheless, the president didn't decide that day on the extended campaign, "Rolling Thunder," for which McNamara and the Chiefs had been pressing for a year, but he did a few days later, after starting direct U.S. bombing of South Vietnam about the same time. The bombing didn't stop for eight years, dropping nearly eight million tons of bombs, four times the total tonnage of World War II.

It's not clear to me, in retrospect, why I didn't leave the government at that time and go back to Rand. I was despairing about the bombing, which I regarded as murderous, hopeless, and likely to escalate rapidly out of control and lead to war with China (it didn't, thanks to tight control by McNamara and Johnson, bitterly resented by the military). Instead, for reasons lost to me, I stayed on. For a time, among other things, I continued to collect reports of VC atrocities, which were very popular with officials who had to justify the bombing to the public. One thing that had never occurred to me to do, any more than in my first week in the Pentagon, was to alert anyone in Congress or the press or public as to what was coming, either in the months after the election when the president was still hesitating to give the order or in the early weeks when the campaign, slowed down by weather, was still being presented as being discrete responses

to “provocations,” and could have been reversed; or in the months after that before the administration was committed to full-scale, open-ended ground invasion. Nor did anyone else do this, or think of it so far as I know. Yet senior members were at this time waging, separately, last-ditch battles internally to end or limit our engagement. Ball, Bundy (not JTM, though he agreed), then Humphrey, with the help of Hughes and encouragement of Thomson; then Clifford, Russell, Mansfield, Fulbright, Aiken, even McGeorge Bundy. Not one revealed his critique to the public or Congress. Perhaps it was too late by then; yet they didn’t think so, or they would never have made the efforts they did. But they kept their efforts within the bounds of loyal service to the president, giving secret advice he was free to reject without embarrassment in front of others or having to explain himself and justify his rejection. They provided no real counterweight to the Joint Chiefs, whose views, the president knew, were sure to be leaked to hawkish committee chairmen in Congress and to Republicans if he went too far in resisting their demands. He could count on his civilian appointees not to leak; and the senior Democrats in Congress who strongly disagreed with the direction of his policy (which none of them foresaw or understood in its full dimensions) would not publicly oppose him.

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